Long and Stony Road

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ISBN: 978-1-7365979-7-2

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Published by Can't Put it Down Books Willow Spring, NC 27592

Cover design by Eric Labacz www.labaczdesign.com

A Long and Stony Road is dedicated to the brave men, women, and children of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond who risked life and limb in the struggle to make America faithful to its founding ideals enshrined in the United States Constitution and the amendments attached to it.

To the men, women, and children who no longer accepted passively their status as second-class citizens of the United States to which they were assigned by white society for centuries since the centuries of chattel slavery, until they were animated by a new spirit of freedom that inspired a hope and vision of a beloved community of black and white together.

To the generations of men, women, and children who endured a daily diet of humiliation and were force-fed the lie that because of the color of their skin, black men, women, and children were less than human.

To the men, women, and children who demonstrated to the world that a repressed group of people could conquer the violence to which they were vulnerable by acts of nonviolence, revealing the inhumanity of many against them by an attitude of humanity toward those who dehumanize them.

To the men, women, and children who sought to overcome the natural human urge to meet violence and barbarism with steadfast self-discipline, love, and forbearance.

To the leaders and visionaries of the Movement including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Diane Nash, and Daisy Bates who led the people with a vision of nonviolence and the absence of retribution, tireless organizing and strategizing a clear and articulate rationale for courageous action.

Chapter One

Stony the road we trod

Bitter the chastening rod
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died
Yet with a steady beat
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" James Weldon Johnson

THE REVEREND HENRI ESPER found a seat in one of the coaches marked for "colored passengers" as he boarded the overnight train for Little Rock, Arkansas, at Union Station in Washington, DC. It was nearly a nine-hundred-mile trip, and because of stops in towns and cities on the way, it was more than a sixteen-hour journey on the train.

It was nearly midnight as the train pulled away. He stood up by his seat and placed the sack of sandwiches in the overhead shelf beside his suitcase. The kitchen staff at the Cadillac Hotel had kindly prepared them as fuel for the journey. It would be a long night in the dark countryside before there would be enough light to read. The colored cars didn't have any personal reading lights.

Henri got as comfortable as he could, taking off his raincoat and resting his head against it in the seat that he judged had been transplanted from a coach no longer in service. Within a short time, his eyes grew heavy. He was lulled into a trance halfway between wakefulness and sleep by the hypnotic "clickity-clack" of the train's wheels beneath him. His eyes gave up the struggle to stay open, and his head began to bob up and down. His ears, however, still registered the rhythm of steel wheels against steel rails, his drowsy mind translating the sound into the words, "Rosewood Town. Rosewood Town. Rosewood Town." He didn't know why the wheels would repeat the name of that small Florida burg that he hadn't thought about for at least a couple of decades.

But he did remember the first time he had heard the name Rosewood and the story of its short life and tragic demise. It was back in one particularly memorable class in fifth grade at the public school in his tiny village of St. Vincent, one of the northern gateways to the Adirondacks.

It had been Mr. Cletis Tanner, the only Negro member of the faculty, who first mentioned the name Rosewood. Henri had never forgotten it.

It was a lesson that he remembered well.

Mr. Tanner gave no introduction to the story of Rosewood. He jumped right in.

"...the whole bloody incident of Rosewood began with the frantic cries in the in the middle of the public street by Mrs. Fanny Taylor."

Some of the boys, including Henri, tittered self-consciously when he spoke the word "bloody."

"Help! Someone please help me! I've been beaten."

She was the wife of a white mill worker in a small town named Sumner, Florida. A tiny crowd of female neighbors gathered around the shrieking woman to comfort her. She burst into terrified tears once she cried out for help, so the neighbors could barely make out what she said had happened.

"The man was big. He didn't rape me. He beat me with his huge fist and kicked me with his boots when I fell on the floor." Her voice was getting louder. She clenched her teeth. "He was...a nigger!"

The women in the crowd repeated Fanny Taylor's words. "A nigger! A nigger raped her!"

By then, some men from the town, some of them husbands of the women, joined the small crowd of women surrounding Mrs. Taylor.

"What happened here? What's the matter?" the men asked.

"Fanny has been beaten by a nigger," several women answered in unison.

"Fanny's been raped by a nigger," one man repeated to another man who said he couldn't hear what the women had said.

"Rosewood!" several of the men hollered. "It *has* to be someone from Rosewood!"

"Yeah!" several men agreed. "There ain't any niggers in Sumner except the few who come from Rosewood to work at the sawmill"

"The sheriff warned us about an escaped prisoner named Jesse Hunter probably hiding among those other niggers in Rosewood," said Buck Ewing. "Sounds like a likely suspect to me."

The news caused the men to look at each other and reduced their disorderly howling to a more subdued murmuring. "I'll go to Bronson to notify the sheriff. Duke, gather the men by the sawmill..."

As Duke Purdy hurried off to follow his order, Ewing added, "And tell them to bring their guns and rifles."

The Sumner townsmen hollered and cheered as one by one they regathered in front of the sawmill. James Taylor, the bashful husband of the young Fanny, was in the impromptu search party, too. He was at the front reluctantly but figured that because Ewing had ordered Duke to muster this provisional militia in pursuit of the nigger deemed most likely to be guilty of beating his wife, he needed to display gratitude to them.

"We'll get the lousy son of a bitch, James. Count on it," Purdy reassured Taylor.

One of the women had assisted Fanny Taylor to a chair on a house porch across the street from the sawmill and overlooking the gathering posse. She overheard Purdy's self-satisfied bravado. Her face revealed a strange discomfort with Duke Purdy's zeal for retribution. Her glance met that of the handsome blacksmith in the gathering of men, Robert Patrick, whose skin was as white as that of any of the others. He immediately lowered his gaze from her to the ground. But Fanny's eyes betrayed a furtive intimation of shame that only Robert understood.

Sheriff Walker, followed by Buck Ewing and several armed deputies, arrived on horses from Bronson, the county seat.

Ewing and Purdy stepped back a few steps in front of the posse and ceded leadership to the sheriff. The burly, bearded man was trying hard to emulate the threatening posture of a sheriff, but he knew that both the county commission and the more persuaded of these men in Sumner were dissatisfied by his ineptness in handling "the Negro problem" in Levy County.

"We all present now? Anybody we still need to be waitin' on? If so, they'll just need to come to Rosewood on their own

and join us there. The rest of you, hitch a ride on someone's wagon. We're moving on to Rosewood to snare this nigger who's escaped from the custody of the state. Make sure your firearm is loaded but don't shoot until the order to let loose comes down from me through either Purdy or Ewing. That clear?"

The men hurried and found space on one of the four or five wagons driven by their fellow townsmen. The posse of twenty or thirty was compliant with the sheriff's commands and, for the time being at least, respectful of his civic authority.

Ewing spoke privately with Sheriff Walker. "If the bastard is hiding out in Rosewood, he's likely with the schoolteacher Sylvester Carrier. If not there, then with Sam Carter, the other blacksmith in town. Both of them hate us white folks."

Walker replied, "I'm familiar with Carrier. He's been brought before me twice or three times for various offenses. Purdy, take one group of men with you to Sylvester Carrier's. Ewing, do the same at Carter's. But remember, both of you, I want Carrier and Carter taken alive, not dead."

CARRIER'S TWO YOUNG SONS were in the pinewoods in front of their home playing cowboys and Indians when they heard the rustling of feet on the forest floor not far from them. They looked at each other with trepidation They couldn't see who was making the rustling noises, but they knew almost instinctively that the approaching gang of rustlers meant trouble. They slinked off toward their home.

"Dad," one cried out inside the log house, "there's someone creeping our way. We didn't stop to see who they were but it sounded like there was a whole bunch of them like when the Klan came to threaten us about the lessons you were teaching at the school."

Just then Frank Irwin barged in through the front door. He was trying to catch his breath so he could speak. "Sylvester...there's a posse of men from Sumner comin' this way...with Sheriff Walker. They don't…look like they's intendin' to pay you a social visit…They've got guns…and rifles, Sylvester."

The initial look of confusion on Carrier's face sharpened, his eyes acutely vigilant, his lithe body ready to spring into

action.

"Everybody, kneel down on the floor and keep your head down," he shouted as he himself bent low and crept along the floor toward the large window in the wall.

He saw Sheriff Walker at the head of a column of twenty or more white men who looked aroused and inflamed with single-minded hungry determination. Carrier's heart raced as someone threw a rock through the window. The crack of the window breaking was echoed by the women's shrieking.

"Keep low, dammit," Sylvester shouted.

He stood erect, though, from his crouched position and aimed two shots through the gaping hole in the glass. The shots rang out, and they could hear one of the posse cry out, "Shit! I've been hit in the leg!"

Sylvester's Aunt Thelma came over to him and tried to comfort him with her embrace.

"This shootin' at one another won't solve nothin'. I want to talk to Sheriff Walker, Sylvester. He knows me. He'll listen to me. We've helped each other several times—"

Sylvester cut her off and pushed himself from her arms. "You ain't goin' out there in front of angry men with guns, Thelma!"

"That's all crazy talk, Aunt Thelma," said Sylvester's wife, Emma. "You listen to Sylvester now."

Instead of heeding their words, Thelma ran to the door out to the front veranda and slipped out. Sylvester tried to grab his aunt by the arm, but she was too fast and determined. She stepped out carefully onto the veranda.

When the sheriff saw who it was, he ordered, "Put your guns down, men! Nobody shoot! Thelma, what are you doin' comin' out here like a crazy fool?"

Thelma's hands were outstretched. "Look, Sheriff Walker. My hands are empty. I ain't got no gun. I want to know what this fuss is all about."

"We're looking for an escaped prisoner. He's one of your people. We have reason to believe he's hiding out here in Rosewood. Is Jesse Hunter in there with you? Somebody said that he knows Sylvester."

"No, Sheriff, we don't know no Jesse Hunter, and he ain't in there. We don't know nothin' about an escaped prisoner."

"Who you got in there with you?"

"It's just us. Sylvester, his wife Emma, the three children, and myself."

Walker looked at the men in the posse, especially Duke Purdy.

"You sure that's all who's in there?"

"Sheriff, I midwifed more than half of you men into the world. You know I haven't lied to you before, and I ain't lyin' now." Thelma began to say something else but paused. "Sheriff, I saw the man who beat Fanny and almost killed her...he was...white."

Without warning, the sound of a firearm at close range resounded in the yard. The front of Thelma's apron was blotched with her blood. Her voice was stilled. Her eyes grew as large as plates as though she couldn't believe what had happened.

"Aunt Thelma!" Sylvester cried out from within the front room. Another two shots rang out from the house through the door, striking one of the posse in the leg.

Sylvester jumped out of the house onto the veranda, took hold of Thelma's ample frame, and dragged her through the door onto the floor of the front room. Emma and the children crouched behind various pieces of furniture. Emma crawled over to Thelma and cradled her head in her arms.

"She's dead, Sylvester," Emma sighed. "My God. They shot her dead."

Sylvester stood up from his crouch, aimed his rifle at the hole made by the thrown rock, and angrily emptied his rifle at the crowd outside.

Two or three more of the posse were hit; they crawled on their bellies in the direction of the pinewoods, trailing streams of blood.

Sheriff Walker held up his right hand to get the attention of the posse. "Retreat, men. Get your asses the hell out of here. Retreat, I say! Back to the horses and wagons and then back to Sumner. Come on, men. On the double!"

As the posse was retreating to the wagons, the sheriff's deputies tossed live torches of flame onto the wooden front porch and left the scene.

WHEN MR. TANNER CONCLUDED his story, he looked exhausted. The class was absolutely silent. Never had they heard such a story in school. They didn't know how to respond. With respectful silence in Aunt Thelma's honor? With silent shock at such unexpected violence? Astonishment at the crude language Mr. Tanner dared to use?

Henri didn't know how to respond either, but he maintained a stoic silence and stood up with appreciation for Mr. Tanner for taking such a risk in relating a story deeper and more vivid than the usual dry reports from their history books. Surely, Mr. Tanner was taking a big risk in telling the story. If Mr. Christopher, the principal, ever found out, he bet Mr. Tanner would be in trouble.

"That's part of the true story of a place called Rosewood. It's a story from real life. Rosewood was an actual place where people lived and worked and worshipped God and had families. Folks like some of us, boys and girls. Negroes. But if you look it up in an atlas of Florida, you'll find nothing at the place where Rosewood is supposed to be."

The children looked at each other quizzically.

"That's because it's not there anymore. There is no more Rosewood."

The children were silent, staring into the space in front of them, oblivious to the presence of the others. "There is no more Rosewood." It sounded so final and irrevocable.

"Why is there no more Rosewood, Mr. Tanner?" a tiny pigtailed girl asked.

"The events of the beginning of the story that I related to you were followed by more terror, more death by gunfire, more homes burned to the ground. There has been no Rosewood since 1923— before you were born. But say the name Rosewood to your parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles, and they will know about it. They will remember that every building except one was burned by mobs. Every single man, woman, and child whom the posse could lay their hands on when they came back the next day from Sumner was shot and killed in cold blood. The few that survived the massacre escaped and spread out over north Florida."

"Just one house was left standing?" one of the boys inquired. "Which house, Mr. Tanner?"

"The home of Mr. John Wright and his family, the owner and operator of the town grocery store. He was a white man.... As I say, your parents or grandparents will know the story. Ask them to tell it to you."

It figures that it was the *white* family's house that was spared," said Henri, the one Negro in the class and one of only three at the Upstate New York school. He and his family had moved to Cape Vincent a few years ago from across Lake Ontario in Upper Canada. His family were descendants of United Empire Loyalist refugees from the colonies during the Revolutionary War.

Mr. Tanner looked proudly at his star pupil but tried not to betray any favoritism. He paused before commenting cautiously on Henri's observation.

"That's right, Henri. That's one reason why I told the story of Rosewood. I wanted the class, our future citizens and leaders, to become aware of some of the inequities between white and black people and communities in our country. Most Negroes are descendants of slaves who were brought to these shores in ships by white traders. Sure, you've heard that many slaves were set free after the Civil War in 1865. But let me ask you, Henri, can I put you on the spot?"

Henri shrugged his shoulders. He was sure that Mr. Tanner would ask the question anyway.

"It's been ninety years since 1865. Honestly, do you feel perfectly free?"

The question stunned Henri. All eyes in the classroom were riveted on him.

Henri pondered Mr. Tanner's question before venturing to respond. Mr. Tanner and Henri's classmates waited silently while he formulated an answer.

"Well, I don't think about whether or not I'm perfectly free most days. I am free enough to come to school and go out to the playground and play with my friends, white or Negro. But I also know from the newspaper and watching the news on TV with my dad that not every Negro pupil in our country is free to play in the same playground as the white kids, or to go to the town school like this one or the school right in their own neighborhood of the city because many schools do not allow Negro pupils to go there. They have to ride a bus to a school for

Negroes. Their state says that keeping Negro kids out of white schools is against the law, but they ignore it. So, if I was one of them, I wouldn't feel I was perfectly free."

"How do you think your parents would answer my question about being perfectly free?"

"When we decided to come to Cape Vincent," Henri said, "my father applied even before we left from Ontario for the job as supervisor, what's called the 'ferry master,' on one of the ferry boats that goes across the river to Wolfe Island. But when he got here, the bossman told him that the job had been given to another man. My dad saw that the new ferry master was a white man while he was just part of the crew. So, I don't think my father feels that he is perfectly free."

"Thank you, Henri," commented Mr. Tanner.

Henri felt proud that Mr. Tanner appreciated his remarks. At the same time, however, he wondered how his comments about "white schools" were being received by his classmates who were all white.

Billy Franklin, a tall, athletic white boy, asked, "So, what are you going to do about it, Henri? Isn't that just the way things are and have been for a long time?"

Henri glanced at Mr. Tanner who nodded at him, presumably to encourage Henri to answer Billy's rather sardonic if not contentious question. Henri would rather that he hadn't urged him to continue.

"I'm not sure I can do a whole lot about such unfairness all by myself. But I know that there are groups of people all over the United States determined to make change happen. I guess I'll just have to read and listen to the news to keep up with what's happening."

Mr. Tanner reserved the privilege of having the last word.

"Who knows, Henri? Maybe someday you will go down to Rosewood and see with your own eyes what's left of it, or to other places where these individuals and groups you mention are not satisfied with the way things are and have been and are working to change things."

Chapter Two

I think the picture in Jet magazine showing Emmett Till's mutilation was probably the greatest media product in the last forty or fifty years because that picture stimulated a lot of interest and anger on the part of blacks all over the country.

Congressman Charles Diggs, Michigan

A letter to Emile Esper February 17, 1958

Dear Brother,

I'm writing to let you know that I arrived here in Washington, DC, on time as planned. Would you please let Mama know that I'm safe in the nation's capital? I know she's worried. The reality of the situation here is not as bad or dangerous as she imagines. I haven't been mugged, and no one has tried up to now.

Let me tell you about one of the last things I did before I departed from New York. A part of me wishes I hadn't.

You read in the papers a couple of years ago, I am sure, of the terrible and tragic death of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. He had been sent by his mother in Chicago for the summer to visit her father and others of his extended family in Money, MS, in the Mississippi Delta.

Till was forcefully abducted from his great-uncle's home—just a ramshackle shanty back in the piney woods—by at least two white men, beaten mercilessly and shot in the woods. His mutilated body was heaved unceremoniously into the Tallahatchie River.

His slender body was recovered three days later. Newspaper reports have it that when they fished him out of the river, Till's face was barely recognizable as human, so disfigured it was, one of his eyes totally missing and the other forced shut by the swelling of his cheekbones.

I had difficulty reading the reports in the newspaper. I admit that a small rivulet of tears started to flow down my cheeks, and it grew into a veritable flood with each new story I read about Emmett that was more barbarous and violent than the one preceding it.

My God! The poor boy was in over his head the moment he

stepped off the train in Jackson. He had no idea of what Mississippi was like, how some white men there treat black lives like disposable paper cups and plates. I wonder if, before he left Chicago, Emmett's mama told him anything at all about what white people are like where she had come from? But it's not fair, I admit, to place responsibility on her for her son's horrible slaughter. For all we know, she might have been trying to speak sense to the boy who was barely a teenager. He was probably so full of excitement about the trip south and of being independent that he didn't hear a word of what his mother might have been trying to tell him. Or he was so cocksure that he thought he didn't need any unsolicited advice from his mother, that he was smart enough to make his own way in the swamp that is Mississippi. I've detected the same attitude in our nieces and nephews who are about Emmett's age. (Of course, neither you nor I ever dismissed our elders' advice like that when we were growing up!)

One of the two men eventually apprehended by the police and charged with the murder was the proprietor of Bryant's Grocery Store, which the alleged precipitating event involving Till is said to have taken place. It's a small world! What really happened is still under dispute two years later. According to the grocer's testimony to the police, when his twenty-one-year-old wife, Carolyn Bryant, came to the store, Till whistled at her suggestively, flirted with her, and made other physical and verbal advances in plain sight and hearing of other customers.

A jury of her peers did not find the woman's testimony credible, as you probably know. The judge, in fact, didn't admit her testimony in its entirety into the court.

Nonetheless, the all-white jury found the two suspects not guilty, and the judge ordered them released from custody. What the hell did they expect? An all-white jury!

Apparently, the purported encounter between Till and the young woman violated the strict Jim Crow regulations of the interaction of a Negro male with a white female, if not an officially recorded legal code as a long-accepted ethical custom in that environment, but just as binding.

In addition to my profound sadness, reading about Till and this tragic event hit me with a sudden jolt of anxiety and even dread. On the very eve of my departure for the South as a Yankee Negro, the thought of an unsuspecting violation of a long-held cultural taboo in

an unfamiliar part of the country made me realize suddenly that there was much about the deep South, frankly, that is still an unfathomable mystery to me in spite of all the reading I have done to prepare for my journey. I think I can say categorically that even if my eyes find a young lady like Carolyn Bryant attractive or sexually alluring, I will not dare to whistle at her or make any other kind of suggestive remark to her. "Just look at the candy with your eyes, but don't try to taste it," right? Wouldn't the cops just drool over the prospect of nabbing a Negro pastor flirting with a white woman?

But beyond that, how can I be sure that in my dealings with people I will not violate some other unspoken taboo? What if I look at someone in a way that people in a Jim Crow environment interpret as inappropriate? Or speak in a tone of voice that in the South is heard as terribly offensive or say something that to you and me might sound innocent enough but in Atlanta or Birmingham or rural Alabama or Mississippi is considered as outright reprehensible?

I recalled that Lucius Smallwood was the only Negro classmate I had back at Union Seminary who was from the deep South. I might have mentioned him to you in one of my letters from Union. The other Negroes were all from the big northern cities. I managed to track down Lucius's telephone number. He's now a Baptist preacher down in Crawfordville, Georgia. We had a long talk over the telephone. We got caught up with each other's lives since Union. He congratulated me on winning the Howard Thurman sermon writing contest, which I appreciated.

Then I told him how I was using the cash winnings awarded by the Thurman Foundation to do a self-guided tour of the deep South to explore the tremendous gains there in recent years made by the up-and-coming civil rights movement.

"I came to study theology in the north, in New York City," he responded, "to get the hell away from Jim Crow. Why in heaven's name would you choose to spend good money touring these states that are in Jim Crow's tightest grip?"

"Well, my mama is puzzled about the same thing. Just curiosity, I guess. There's a furious battle going on there over segregation. The civil rights movement that is trying to rid the country of the sin of segregation is motivated by Christianity and supported largely by black Christians. But at the same time, from what I read, a great deal of the adamant and sometimes violent resistance to desegregation arises from Christian churches and is couched in the language of

traditional Christian biblical theology. What sense do you make of that? How can two groups of well-meaning Americans arrive at such diametrically opposed conclusions from reading the same Scripture? Maybe you've figured that out, Lucius, but I'm baffled. I know that in our history as Christians, this antithesis is not new. We've been pondering theology and the Bible for centuries and landing at radically different understandings ever since the church was born. But here it is happening right in my own country. I'm eager to explore the phenomenon here for myself. At the very least, it'll give me plenty of fresh fodder for informative sermons back in Harlem."

"I imagine then," Lucius responded, "that the folks who award the Thurman Prize would be proud that you are pursuing such a firsthand personal introduction to a social problem down here that many of us fear may be intractable and ultimately beyond human resolution."

"I hope you're wrong about that, Lucius. But except for those brief years at Union, you've lived in Dixie all your life, so I owe it to you to give your ideas serious thought. After Dr. King's surprise victory over the Montgomery city bus system last year, he and his followers are encouraged that this civil rights movement, particularly the practice of nonviolent resistance, can pull off a miracle and resolve an apparently intransigent issue."

I asked Lucius for a favor. In light of Emmett Till's sad fate, would he orient me on the more subtle, perhaps hidden quagmires in daily interactions in the Jim Crow South, particularly with whites, where I could inadvertently get trapped and be guilty of breaching some long-held custom of southern decorum and end up in pieces like Emmett Till?

Among other things he warned me about, Emile was to "never forget that in the South, the white man is in charge for the reason that he believes that God has decreed that it be so. Sure, slavery was banished over nine decades ago, but many if not most whites down here still feel they have a divine right to keep people who look like you and me subservient in every way.

"For instance, never presume to say good morning to a white person unless they greet you first. And even then, never look the white person straight in the eye. Don't make him suspect that you consider yourself his social equal. That was Emmett Till's unforgivable sin. He forgot the place in the social order assigned for him. The white man doesn't appreciate, to put it mildly, when a

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Negro thinks and behaves as if he's not subject to his preeminence. There are few if any laws in the South to protect that Negro from the unfortunate and sadly often violent consequences if he does. Hence, Emmett Till. You get my point?"

Lucius paused to allow me to ponder this. "Still want to come south, Henri?"

I smiled a silly, anxious grin. I'd seen the graphic photographs in *Life* magazine of the young Emmett Till's disfigured body. Ever since my eyes came upon them, I couldn't erase them from my mind. I didn't want Mama or other siblings to ever see me like that. Truly, my innards weren't certain anymore that I was up to this purely voluntary tour I had planned.

But Rosa Parks risked a lot to keep her seat on the Montgomery city bus last December and not give it up to a much stronger white male. Can I do any less than emulate the courage of this tiny seamstress?

"I'm planning on being on the train to Washington and beyond tomorrow, Lucius," I promised.

Gotta go, brother. Still got some packing to do. And some contemplating and praying before my day is through. Stay well and take care of Mama.

With much fraternal love, your older brother, Henri